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SUBJECT: KARBALA MODE: SECOND EDITION

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Karbala Mode is a vehicle for capturing observations and anecdotes about life in the world Shi'a pilgrimage capital that otherwise might not be reported. End Summary.

Where's Abbas?

¶2. (SBU) Since being sworn into office in April, Karbala's government leaders have spent very little time actually governing. Governor Amal al-Din al Hir and Provincial Council (PC) Chairman Mohammad al-Musawi have struck deals divvying up the PC committee chairmanships but accomplished few other tasks. Mostly, they have expressed a desire to attract foreign investment to the province and, on that pretext, have spent considerable time traveling abroad. Governor Amal al-Din (State of Law) and Chairman Mohammad (Hope of Two Rivers) currently are on a three-week trip featuring stops in Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Beirut. Deputy PC Chairman Naseyif Jassim Mohammad and Second Deputy Governor Yusif al-Haboubi have been left behind to manage the shop. First Deputy Governor Abbas al-Musawi (the PC Chairman's brother) has not been seen in public since last month's swearing-in ceremony. According to contacts at the Government Center, he has yet to appear in his office. Although Abbas, like his brother, is known to be shy and an awkward public speaker, the actual reason for his absence remains a mystery.

Loathe Thy Neighbor

¶3. (SBU) A local man, accused of being a terrorist, was held in jail for three months based on "secret information" provided by an informant who claimed the man participated in the deadly Shi'a militia violence during the Shabaniyah observances here in August, 2007. When his case finally came to trial, the only witness produced was an Iraqi police officer who testified that he had never seen the defendant before; he signed the complaint, he said, because he was forced to do so. The defendant stated that he was a member of the Iraqi Army, had fought against the Jaysh al-Mahdi and other militias, and that he was falsely accused by a neighbor who wanted to steal his land. He continued that he was on duty during the time he was accused of taking part in the riots of 2007. He became almost hysterical when relating that, while he was in prison, his young daughter was diagnosed with cancer and lost an eye. The three judges ruled that the defendant was a member of the Iraqi Army who really had been on duty during the time he was accused of taking part in terrorist activities. They also determined that the evidence against him was false and set him free. No word on whether the person who provided the evidence will face charges.

Turbah Charged

¶4. (SBU) When prostrating themselves in prayer, Shi'as the

world over touch their foreheads to turbahs, small ceramic tablets that are made exclusively from Karbala clay. The soil here is considered sanctified by the blood Imam Husayn and his relatives shed when martyred during the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E., the signal event that launched Shi'a Islam. Turbahs are inexpensive and widely sold in local markets. However, vendors here have hit upon a way to charge more for the tablets. Several have been observed selling turbahs for more than ten times the going rate by claiming they have been blessed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and thus can speed the worshippers' prayers to God's ear.

Knowledgeable contacts assure us that turbahs are never blessed by anyone and that the notion a turbah has anything to do with one's prayers is nonsense. Nevertheless, they admit that the claims are an effective marketing ploy and Qadmit that the claims are an effective marketing ploy and report that Iranian pilgrims in particular are snapping up the purported "special" turbahs like proverbial hotcakes.

Paper Weight

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¶5. (SBU) Earlier this year, we provided Karbala's Project Management Unit with trailers to serve as an alternative to their overcrowded office. Recently, officials at the Land Titles Office have asked whether we might supply them with a trailer or two to help store some of the tidal wave of documents overwhelming their work space at the Government Center. Karbala, like the rest of Iraq, languishes decades behind when it comes to utilizing information technology. Most documents are filed by hand rather than electronically, producing innumerable--and essentially unsearchable--boxes of paper. An examination of the boxes the LTO wished to

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transfer led us to turn down their request; the documents' weight was simply too much for the trailer floors to support.

Hearts, Minds and Stomachs

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¶6. (SBU) Cool desserts are much appreciated by Karbalans, particularly as the temperatures climb. Recognizing this, we have found that locals are more than willing to meet with us on our forward operating base (FOB) if we promise them ice cream. Indeed, even contentious contractor disputes are easily resolved when ice cream is introduced into the mix. Like those of other PRTs, our FOB's dining facility stocks an ample supply of brand-name American ice cream in several varieties. During the past two weeks, several contacts have phoned inquiring about when they may stop by again. Each has made a point of asking whether we still have "that wonderful American ice cream" and proposed meeting times that coincide with dessert. The flavor favored by our interlocutors: Chocolate chip.

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